

From Prison Cell to Palace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 37:2–41:40.*

Memory Text: “There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (*Genesis 39:9*).

The story of Jacob continues, with twists and turns that, again, contrast the depravity of humanity with the goodness and mercy of God.

Genesis 34 tells of the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah by a local ruler and the subsequent massacre of all the city's males by two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi. Jacob, fearing reprisal, flees and returns to Bethel (*Genesis 35*), where, despite all these horrendous events, the Lord again appears to him and reaffirms the covenant promises: “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; and the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land” (*vss. 11, 12*).

The rest of Genesis 35 deals with the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. Mention is also made of Reuben, who “lay with Bilhah his father's concubine” (*vs. 22*). The chapter ends with Jacob reuniting with Isaac, 180 years old, who dies and is buried by his two sons.

Genesis 36 covers the genealogy of Esau, the part of the family that, basically, fades from the immediate scene. Scripture then resumes (*Genesis 37*) with Jacob and his “chosen” seed.

A lesson in all this?

If, amid so much sin, God can nevertheless fulfill His will, imagine what would happen if all those who profess His name actually obeyed Him as He asks.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 23.*

The Dreamer

Read Genesis 37 and then answer the following questions:

1 Why did Joseph's brothers hate him so much?

2 How did Joseph aggravate the situation?

3 Read verses 21, 22. What irony exists in the fact that, of all the brothers, Reuben was the one who tried to do what was right?

4 Read verses 25-28. Why do you think they decided not to kill him?

5 Look back over Jacob's life. In what ways might he have brought this tragedy upon himself by his past actions and mistakes?

However horrific this story, considering the background of this family, it shouldn't be all that surprising. Jealousy, violence, and deceit marked these people in one way or another from the earliest days. And these boys—though raised by a father who worshiped the true God, who even received special revelations from God—showed that they themselves didn't know God, nor had they experienced the conversion of heart that's essential for all who truly want to serve Him.

Look at how far uncontrolled sin (in this case jealousy) took these people. What message should this story have for each of us regarding where sin, unless dealt with, can lead?

Sin With the Canaanites

Read Genesis 38. What is the essence of this story? What does it tell us about the character of Judah?

For some reason the story of Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph story. Perhaps, if nothing else, the Lord wanted to contrast the immorality of Joseph's betrayer, Judah, with the moral character of the betrayed, Joseph.

Maybe even more important, Genesis 38 also helps us understand "that the sons of Jacob, forgetting the sacred vocation of their race, were in danger of perishing in the sins of Canaan. Had not God in mercy interposed to bring about the removal of the whole house of Jacob to Egypt, the chosen race might have succumbed to the corrupting influence of Canaanite customs. Thus, chapter 38 is an integral part of the early history of Israel."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 434.

However sinful Judah's actions were, how does he, even amid all this, show some moral fiber? See vs. 26; see also Gen. 37:26.

After being discovered, Judah could do little but admit his guilt. Again, as in the plot against Joseph, he revealed a spirit of fair play and sincerity beneath his sometimes scandalous and corrupt conduct. His frank confession, his subsequent treatment of Tamar, and his special place in the ancestral line of Christ (*Gen. 49:10*) indicate a thorough reform on his part. A character more excellent than that of his older brothers qualified him for the leadership of the family and his posterity for leadership in Israel (*see Gen. 49:3, 4, 8-10*).

Why must we be so careful in not passing judgment upon people? Matt. 7:1. How can we differentiate between judging actions and judging people? Why is that distinction so important?

Joseph in Egypt (*Genesis 39*)

The caravan holding Joseph captive passed the hills where Jacob's tents stood. For a time the teenager "gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 213. However, Joseph, remembering Jacob's stories about God's love and constancy shown to Abraham, Isaac, and him, decided to trust the Lord and act as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. With Joseph's descent into Egypt, divine Providence prepared the way for the deliverance of Jacob's family and for the foreign domination that Abraham's children were to experience until the sin of the Amorites in Canaan had reached its full measure (*Gen. 15:13-16*). It begins an incredible story of what the Lord can do through someone who, despite all odds, seeks to remain faithful to Him.

Considering the little that was revealed about Joseph before, not to mention the character of his family, what, if anything, was there from Joseph's past that would indicate he would be so faithful to the Lord? What lessons can we learn from the answer?

Considering, too, the problems with lust shown by other family members (*Gen. 35:22; 38:16, 18*), not to mention the common practice of polygamy (which no doubt fed the lower passions), Joseph's fortitude amid the constant badgering by the master's wife is a powerful testimony to his faith and character.

Here's Joseph, unjustly sold into slavery, then, unjustly, thrown into prison. Yet, three times **Genesis 39** states that "the Lord was with" him. How are we to understand what that means? How could God be "with" him when so many bad things were happening to him?

One thing is clear: Problems and trials are no indication that God has forsaken anyone. Joseph was unable to understand the providence of God; he couldn't see then what we can see so clearly now. Of course, from his perspective none of this made sense; he was, nevertheless, determined to remain faithful anyway.

What lessons about trusting God, despite outward appearances, can you learn from this story?

The Cupbearer and the Baker *(Genesis 40)*

Both the baker and the cupbearer were high-ranking officials at Pharaoh's court. (*Compare Neh. 1:11.*) They had themselves been thrown into jail (they may have been accused of plotting to overthrow Pharaoh) and had been placed under Joseph's care.

What further light do verses 6-8 shed upon Joseph's character and disposition?

Even here, in jail, Joseph not only sought to help others but witnessed for the Lord, as well (*see vs. 8*), giving God glory for the interpretation of the dreams.

Despite Joseph's "success" in the prison and his faithfulness to God, what does Joseph say that shows just how keenly aware he is of the unjust treatment he has faced and how badly he wanted to get out of that jail?

Regardless of his faith, Joseph still sought human help in securing his own release. Again, not knowing the future, not knowing the Lord's intentions, he did what he could to try to get out of his situation. This is certainly human and understandable. Unfortunately, as the chapter shows, it didn't work. Once released, the chief butler forgot all about Joseph. Of course, in fairness to the chief butler, what could he have said: "Hey, Pharaoh, there's a Hebrew in the dungeon who's good at interpreting dreams; why don't you let him out"? And as we'll see in Genesis 41, he did eventually make mention of Joseph when the time was right. Until then, Joseph had to struggle with doubt and discouragement as he sat for two more years in that jail.

No doubt Joseph's disappointment must have been bitter regarding his situation. How easily he could have given up all faith and hope. What do we do when we find ourselves, like Joseph, bitterly disappointed by events in our life? How can we maintain faith and hope amid such disappointments?

Joseph's Release *(Gen. 41:1-40)*

This chapter introduces us to a typical Egyptian setting. We read of cows cooling off as they stand half submerged in the river. Reed grasses are mentioned (*Gen. 41:2, NIV*). And Joseph shaves as he leaves prison (Semites are identifiable in Egyptian drawings because they wear beards). Because Egyptians regarded the Nile as the source of life, the portrayal of lean cows coming up from the river must have scared the Egyptians.

How does the chief butler finally come through for Joseph?

Notice also how Joseph, even after all these disappointments, still expressed his faith in the God of his fathers. This is seen in verse 16, where Joseph states so clearly that it was only through his God that he could interpret the dream. This is remarkable because, considering his circumstances, it would have been very easy for him to credit all this to himself in order to make himself look better before Pharaoh. Instead, we see again Joseph's faith in action.

After Joseph interprets the dream, what does he say that, in another way, witnesses to his God?

For Joseph, all the events he predicted were the result of the action of God. In other words, He saw the hand of the Lord in all that would take place. Again, his words show that he trusted in the sovereignty and the power of God, which certainly helps explain why he was able to keep his faith even while in jail.

Notice, too, that after Joseph interpreted the dream, he started giving the king advice about what to do, which included setting someone up to take charge of storing grain. What in the dream, at least as recorded in Scripture, could have been interpreted in that manner? Nothing. Perhaps Joseph, sensing an opening that could get him out of jail, was angling for the spot himself. All things considered, why not? It would be the human thing to do, even for a human who loved God and was faithful to Him.

Further Study: “From the dungeon Joseph was exalted to be ruler over all the land of Egypt. It was a position of high honor, yet it was beset with difficulty and peril. One cannot stand upon a lofty height without danger. As the tempest leaves unharmed the lowly flower of the valley, while it uproots the stately tree upon the mountaintop, so those who have maintained their integrity in humble life may be dragged down to the pit by the temptations that assail worldly success and honor. But Joseph’s character bore the test alike of adversity and prosperity. The same fidelity to God was manifest when he stood in the palace of the Pharaohs as when in a prisoner’s cell. He was still a stranger in a heathen land, separated from his kindred, the worshipers of God; but he fully believed that the divine hand had directed his steps, and in constant reliance upon God he faithfully discharged the duties of his position.”
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 222.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In the lesson for this week, dreams and their interpretations played a big role in how God worked, because in this part of the ancient world, in that culture, dreams were considered omens from the various gods. Does God today work through dreams and interpretations as He did back then? Or might He do so more in one culture today than in another, where dreams and interpretations aren’t taken as seriously? If the Joseph story were placed in a contemporary setting—say, in your own culture—how might the Lord have revealed Himself and His plans?
- 2 Let class members who are willing talk about some of their own personal “Joseph” stories, accounts of painful experiences that, viewed from later on, revealed the amazing providence of God.
- 3 Some people go through bitter experiences and come out stronger in faith; others have their faith destroyed. As a class, discuss the question: What makes the difference between the two outcomes?

The Troublesome Boy, Part 2

by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN

Samuel scored highest on the year-end exams and earned a scholarship to the Adventist school. His proud father agreed he could go. But an uncle warned Samuel's father of the danger of letting Samuel study in a Christian school. "He will wander from our religion. Better send him to the Islamic school."

When Samuel learned that his father had changed his mind, he was devastated. He objected, but his parents said he could study in the Islamic school or stay in the government's school in the village. Samuel chose the poorly staffed government school.

He studied hard and never gave up his dream to attend the Adventist school. His faith grew stronger as he studied his Bible and prayed. When he scored the highest marks on his exams, his father told Samuel he could study at the Adventist school in the city.

Samuel's joy turned to sadness when his father fell sick and died. He knew that his mother could not feed and educate the children alone. For two years Samuel remained at home and worked to help feed and educate the younger children. But he never gave up his dream of an education.

One day some church leaders visited the village to hold meetings, and Samuel translated for them. When the leaders learned why Samuel was not in school, they offered him a partial scholarship to study. But his family could not afford to pay the remainder.

Undaunted, Samuel visited the Adventist secondary school in the city and found someone who would sponsor him to study. At last Samuel's dream would come true!

Samuel's mother saw how God was answering her son's prayers and providing for him. When Samuel returned home from school, Samuel talked to her about God, and she listened. Soon Samuel's mother gave her life to Jesus.

Samuel's mother regrets that she did not realize earlier the great truths her son had discovered. "If I had known," she says, "I could have raised my children differently." But she faithfully brings the youngest children to church with her.

Samuel feels responsible to help his brothers find God. "I want us to be together in heaven," he says simply. "I want to spread God's love to everyone in our village."

Our mission offerings helped establish the school and church in Samuel's village. Many who have found Christ through these institutions will say Thank you in heaven.

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